Dealu Frumos / Schönberg / Lesses

A short historical introduction to a typical Transylvanian Saxon village

The fortress church

The exact age of the village is unkown. The earliest written mention is 1280, when a document tells of a certain Gerlachus de Pulchramonte (the Latin rendering of Schönberg) inheriting a half share of a mill in nearby Probstdorf (Stejărişu). Archaeological and contextual evidence suggests that the village is among the oldest of the Saxon settlements, probably dating from the mid-twelfth century, when a wave of German colonists was enticed by the king of Hungary to strengthen the southern frontier of his kingdom. The enticement was land, free from the control of a feudal lord, and the promise that the *hospites* or guests would govern themselves according to their own laws. In return, the king expected military service and, even more importantly, taxes from his new subjects. These land and freedom-hungry peasants and artisans were mainly drawn from the northern Rhine areas of modern Germany, Belgium, Holland and, especially, Luxemburg; it was only later that they came to be called Saxons. Such people not only populated a region considered as empty wasteland but also brought with them the most advanced agricultural technology of the day and its attendant social structure. That technology, crop rotation in three open fields, was practiced largely unchanged until the scattered landholdings were forcibly consolidated, under Hungarian rule, in 1892. The era of modern, small-scale capitalist farming lasted beyond the end of the Second World War until 1952 when collectivization was forced through under communism. Since the revolution in December 1989, the land has been returned to private tenure, but only in a few cases to its previous owners. Apart from episodes of devastation and periods of war, famine

and plague, Schönberg has been a relatively prosperous village for most of its history. Indeed, its older inhabitants speak of a Garden of Eden that existed here in their youth.

For over seven hundred years, the medieval agricultural practices that had been common to much of western Europe survived unchanged in Schönberg. An unusual feature of this and other villages on the “Fundus regius”, the privileged area allotted to the Saxons, was the absence of a lord of the manor. Serfdom, here as everywhere within the *Sachsenland*, was completely unknown. Each peasant farmer was the legal freeholder of his own farmstead or *Hof*. With ownership of a farmstead came the right of usufruct, to work and enjoy the produce of a hide, the amount and quality of land that was locally considered necessary to support a family, dotted over the open fields. The right to graze a fixed number of cattle on the common pasture and to collect a certain quantity of firewood from the common forest was also attached to possession of a farmstead. There were, too, responsibilities: obedience to the numerous village regulations, which were detailed and onerous, and most importantly, participation in the village’s political institutions. The peasant proprietor was, then, both free in the modern sense of owning his own property and having a legally equal political voice and, at the same time, bound within the community and by its rules.

The social and political institutions were so deeply rooted (their origins may reach back thousands of years) and, unlike in other parts of Europe, had remained undisturbed, that they outlived the economic changes, first of modern capitalism and then of fifty years of communism. In particular, the Nachbarschaft continued to function until the Saxon emigrated en masse in the early 1990s. Schönberg’s Saxon population was divided into four *Nachbarschaften* or neighbourhoods. The head of each farmstead was obliged to join the organisation, paying a symbolic membership fee. As a member, he (it was overwhelmingly a masculine affair) could participate in

the election of the institution's officers, the resolution of disputes between neighbours, the judgement and punishment of rule breakers and could call for help from the other members. Above all, he and his family were assured of a ceremonious funeral. Many members of the now defunct *Nachbarschaften* are still living and they all tell of the seriousness and formality with which the annual assembly was conducted. They also tell of the splendid party that followed when wives and children joined the men to eat and drink copious amounts of wine bought with the contents of the fines kitty.

The intense awareness of political responsibility, of existing within a community, and of reciprocal support, which the practice of *Nachbarschaft* embodied, was reinforced by the Church. One illustration of the overlapping frontiers between the two institutions is that the pastor required formal assurance from the *Nachbarvater* that all disputes had been resolved before permitting any member of the *Nachbarschaft* to receive communion. Community and Church were inextricably intertwined: the presbytery was financially responsible for the school and appointed the teachers; the church hall was the only venue for wedding parties, for dances and amateur dramatics; the Lutheran Confession along with the German/Saxon language was the spiritual dimension that all Saxons shared, whatever their social status. The physical presence of the fortress church dominated the village, as it still does. It was within its walls that generations of Saxons had taken refuge during Tartar and Turkish raids and, until recently, had stored their bacon.

View from the Lutheran Saxon fortress church tower; the Romanian Orthodox church, built in 1826, can just be seen in the distance to the left.

The transition of the village's name from Schynebarch, as the Saxons call the village, to Romanian Dealu Frumos reflects the change in the ethnic composition. According to records, the process began in 1752, when eight Romanians and nine gypsies were admitted to the village but gypsy farm labourers may have been here a lot longer. For the Romanians, the attraction of Schönberg was the availability of land to farm, a plot

on which to build or even a vacant farmstead to inhabit and an escape from serfdom. For the Saxon community, admitting outsiders was a desperate step. Transylvania was just recovering from nearly a hundred years of intermittent warfare between the Ottomans and Habsburgs. Schönberg's population had shrunk through famine and plague; farmsteads stood empty and much of the land uncultivated. Now, the Habsburgs demanded taxes at a level that the remaining inhabitants could not manage. By allocating poorer parts of the village and fields to Romanians, the tax burden on the Saxons was eased. From a Romanian perspective, the arrangement could be seen as monstrously unjust and the archives contain one of their letters of complaint to the *Universitas*, the highest Saxon authority. Despite their initially disadvantaged status, the Romanians flourished in Schönberg, adopted Saxon customs and agricultural techniques and several overtook the majority of Saxons in wealth.

Horsedrawn carts are still the main form of transport in rural areas of Transylvania

With increasing access to higher education, especially after World War II, the descendants of the old Romanian families left the village in the hope of better lives in the cities. Today, the most recent arrivals, Roma-Gypsies from Transdinistria, the women dressed in eye-catching, long red skirts, are the most conspicuous residents of this once purely Saxon village.

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